

A Conflicted Heritage

The Byzantine Religious Establishment of a War Ethic

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Two Pillars of Religious Authority in Byzantium

In seeking principles and standards of authority on which to base adjudication on the morality of war, Byzantine theologians found the clarification of the Christian tradition perhaps more complicated than they had expected. Of necessity they negotiated a biblical heritage that both advocated and decried religious violence, as well as an ecclesiastical set of memories in which they had been both an oppressed minority and the oppressive majority. In the end, they used the mediating principle of established liturgical and pastoral rules, as brokered to the wider church through canon law and episcopal rhetoric. The Byzantine approach to the ethics of war is thus quite distinct from the Western church's simpler advocacy of Cicero's just war theory, and it is possessed of several subtle features, not generally appreciated, that elevated moral tentativeness in the face of violence as something more than mere ambiguity.

Christianity was, and remains at heart, an apocalyptic religion. In a decisive move in the late second and third centuries—partly as a reaction against Marcion of Pontus and popular Gnostic speculations that threatened to unravel its own sense of historicity—the church finally committed itself to the sacred texts of the Jewish

canon, definitively adopting them as its own. This was not the same, however, as agreeing to the content of what it had adopted.¹ In fact, as soon as it was more or less accepted universally among the churches that the canon of the Old Testament was authoritative,² Christian theology made sure to fully articulate a sense of how the prescripts of that very Testament would not be definitive by its internal system of allegorical interpretation. Christians believed in the historical normativity of the Hebrew scriptures, therefore, only in a moderated and partial way. The impact of the Crucifixion as a rejection of the classic Old Testament premise that God would vindicate his saints in this lifetime, and the successive waves of early martyrdoms it experienced in the first three generations after Jesus, made the early church rarely presume, after that point, that the historical record could ever be read straightforwardly as God's vindication of a chosen people within history.³

Some of the argumentation presented here was treated earlier in J. A. McGuckin, "Nonviolence and Peace Traditions in Early and Eastern Christianity," in *Religion, Terrorism and Globalization: Nonviolence—A New Agenda*, ed. K. K. Kuriakose (New York, 2006), 189–202.

1 Marcion wished to consign all the Old Testament to the trash-can as being contrary to and unworthy of the Gospel philosophy.

2 The Old Testament was so named and defined, for the first time, by Origen of Alexandria, the third-century philosopher-exegete. See further M. Sheridan, "Old Testament," in *The Westminster Handbook to Origen of Alexandria*, ed. J. A. McGuckin (Louisville, 2004), 159–62.

3 Within the same line of argument, of course, stands the possibility of simple acceptance of the many Old Testament advocations of righteous war. For example, the accounts of the conquest of Canaan as having been commanded by God in the manner of ancient holy

A few emperors—Constantine, Justinian, Heraclius, Justinian II Rhinotmetos, and Nikephoros Phokas—came closest to revitalizing the antique theology of the emperor as New David, but the view did not attain a wide following among professional theologians. Perhaps the monks were always, with a few exceptions, at a significant remove from the central interests of what drove imperial power centers. Despite its initial attractions for imperial-type theologians, such direct Old Testament parallels could all too easily go astray. To an acclamation that an emperor was a New David, such as applied by Anna Komnene to her father, Alexios I, it was all too easy to add “or a new Ahab.”⁴ Symeon the New Theologian uses many coded biblical castigations of the emperor of his day, Basil Bulgaroktonos, finally goading the court to secure his ecclesiastical exile on the ridiculously specious charge that he had venerated an unauthorized icon. Apocalyptic motifs at the core of Christian philosophy, consistently sustained by Byzantine pneumatological writings in the hands of the church fathers and later the monastic ascetics, always ensured that scriptural paradigms would never assume a univocal force as an oracular interpreter of Christian history.⁵

war, so as to take no living prisoners, were universally interpreted by the Christian exegetes as having merely symbolical value: Amalek is thus read not as a paradigm for jihad, but rather as a symbol of moral turpitude. Greek Christian exegetes read God as commanding an ascetic eradication of sin from the heart when he apparently commands genocide by Joshua’s armies.

4 *Alexiad*, 6.3.4: *Anne Comnène, Alexiade*, ed. B. Leib, vol. 2 (Paris, 1967), 47; *Annae Comnenae Alexias*, ed. D. Reinsch and A. Kambylis, CFHB 40.1 (Berlin and New York, 2001), 173; *The Alexiad of Anna Comnena*, trans. E. R. A. Sewter (Harmondsworth, 1988), 186, where she implies the imperial designation New David to justify her father’s “borrowing” of monastic funds to replenish the treasury on the grounds that David too had robbed the temple (see Mark 2:23–28).

5 The straightforward readings of history to this effect contained in, for example, the book of Revelation, never commanded allegiance in the Byzantine world, contrary to the way it was received in the West. Revelation is not cited once in any Byzantine service book or liturgical source, a veritable *damnatio memoriae*. Overall, however, the genre and philosophy of history that Revelation represents is decidedly odd in terms of the overall canon of the New Testament. See further J. A. McGuckin, “The Book of Revelation and Orthodox Eschatology: The Theodrama of Judgement,” in *The Last Things: Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Eschatology*, ed. C. E. Braaten and R. W. Jenson (Grand Rapids, MI, and Cambridge, 2002), 113–34.

Origen of Alexandria is the one most notable in this regard, and after him, the concept that the Hebrew canon has to be read differently in the church is axiomatic.⁶ The fourth-century Syrian biblical master Mar Theodore of Mopsuestia makes it axiomatic in his own exegetical system that the Old Testament cannot be read in any way like the New Testament. For this reason, he contradicted many of his predecessors even to the extent of denying that messianic references in the Old Testament related to Jesus. For Theodore, the entire Old Testament had to be read purely historically for what it referred to in its own day and time. He heavily discouraged what he saw as the extravagant allegorical symbolism of the Alexandrian biblical hermeneutics, preferring a method of critical annotation that was simpler, ethically directed, and more in the manner of a grammarian’s (not a philosopher’s) style of rhetoric. The New Testament, however, according to Theodore, could not be read historically at all. This was why the Two Testaments were speaking wholly different languages to each other and should not be carelessly associated. All the New Testament literature, for Theodore, was apocalyptic, not historical, in its genre and ethos. It looked for its meaning outside the range of earthly dynasties, or laws of cause and effect, and was rooted rather in ends and purposes (*telē*) that were manifested out of the passing away of the shadows of earthly history. All that the Old Testament texts said had to be interpreted within the scope of earthly history (with reference to precise times and conditions), but nothing of what Jesus said had to be interpreted within his time and condition. The Old Testament spoke of This Age; Jesus spoke of the Next Age.⁷

Post-fifth-century Byzantine religious theory condemned both Origen and Theodore, of course, but not before it had made out of the two masters an active and

6 Further see J. J. O’Keefe, “Scriptural Interpretation,” in McGuckin, *Westminster Handbook to Origen of Alexandria*, 193–97.

7 The contrasting style of Origen’s and Theodore’s exegeses can be readily appreciated by a consideration of the masterworks of each writer—their respective *Commentaries on the Gospel of John*. Greek critical edition of Origen: *Origenes Werke: Der Johanneskommentar*, ed. E. Preuschen, GCS 4 (Berlin, 1904); an English translation by R. Heine, *The Fathers of the Church* 80 and 89 (Washington, D.C., 1989 and 1993). Theodore’s Greek text has been lost, but the English edition of his extant Syriac fragments has been recently issued: *Commentary on the Gospel of John: Theodore of Mopsuestia*, trans. M. Conti and ed. J. Elowski (Downer’s Grove, IL, 2010).

widely diffused synthesis. John Chrysostom is its living exemplar, the most reproduced exegetical authority in Byzantium. In most Byzantine-era religious reflections, therefore, one sees a moderated middle ground being followed in terms of scriptural exegetical principles. This may be enough to establish some general ground rules, for there is a more precise task at hand. It remains important, however, to remind oneself of this exegetical process as the first of what is proposed here as the two fundamental pillars of Byzantine religious philosophy: the application of scriptural exegesis in the process of coming to an authoritative position on any given topic, including war.

The second pillar can be described (roughly) as patristic tradition. In Byzantine times, this did not mean simply the writings that are today classified as patristica. Clearly in the heyday of the formation of Byzantine religious attitudes, lasting up to and slightly beyond the seventh century, the writings that comprise the patristic canon were themselves in the midst of the chief controversies that they were attempting to resolve. In other words, nobody in his own day would have regarded John of Damascus as a patristic authority, just as no one in the mid-fourth or early fifth century would have regarded Athanasios or Cyril of Alexandria as balanced theological judges. Their reputations came later and arose partly from the adoption of these significant writers as church fathers through their canonization in the synodical process of the church and the latter's laying down of legal norms (canons). The synods were the formal legal authority of the Byzantine religious world. Athanasios became the authoritative theologian in the process of the Council of Constantinople (381) elevating the Synod of Nicaea (325) to paradigmatic status. Cyril became the East's Christological authority par excellence by his canonization in the synodical process following from Ephesos (431 and 449), via Chalcedon (451) and Constantinople II (553). In short, the authority of the fathers ascended not because of the inherent brilliance of their works, but because of their Byzantine synodical endorsement and thereafter their status in the canonical literature.

This acknowledgment allows for more precision as to the nature of the second pillar: What has been called patristic authority should perhaps be clarified now as canonical tradition. The canons were those rules for discipline and behavior that started to be produced and collated as early as the second century, but which

really arose as a way for Christians to organize church polity after the mid-fourth century.

It was the principle of the local synod that the Constantinian era took forward, affording it a legal sanction, as the emperor gave to local bishops paramagisterial status and set the idea of synodical governance on a new level altogether by pushing it as a quasi-senatorial parallel. In Constantine's invention of the "super-synod"—the concept of the ecumenical council that he first used at Nicaea 325 as a way of establishing imperial religious policy through the episcopal protocols of the Christian church—the emperor and his successors showed a clear intent to use the episcopal synod in a more than merely provincial way by giving it a truly international remit, when summoned by imperial sacra; in addition, it was meant to be staffed by the senior bishops of the Christian world. The development of this process can be seen gaining momentum from the time of the Council of Arles in 314, through Nicaea in 325, to Theodosios's calling of Constantinople I in 381. Once the interprovincial synodical system was established and endorsed by the church as its supreme legislative authority, certainly by the time of the early fifth century, other implications unfolded. In particular, the emperors gave the canons of the church a formal status in civil law.

In 530, for example, Justinian's Codex decreed that whatever was forbidden by the church canons should be prohibited also by the civil law. His Novel 131 states, "We honor the doctrinal decrees of the first four [ecumenical] councils as we honor scripture. We honor the canons given or approved by them just as we honor the [civil] laws."⁸ Even from the time of Constantine, episcopal courts (*audientia episcopalis*) increasingly came to have a parallel status, particularly in the hinterlands, where a strong representation of civil courts and judges could not always be presumed. Perhaps the

8 Codex Justinianus, 1.3.(44) 45, *The Annotated Justinian Codex*, tr. and ed. F. H. Blume (Evanston, IL, 1952), based on Mommsen and Krueger's edition of the *Corpus Iuris Civilis*, as cited in the 2009 web edition prepared by T. Kearley, at <http://uwacadweb.uwyo.edu/blume&justinian/CodeRevisions/Book1revcopy/Book1-3rev.pdf>: "To Julian the Prefect. Given at Constantinople. Oct. 18th. 530: 'Since our laws want the sacred canons to have no less force than the statutes, we ordain that, as to what pertains to them, the sacred canons shall have the same force to the above mentioned ecclesiastics as if the provisions were contained in the civil laws; for as these things are prohibited by the sacred canons, so likewise they are forbidden by our laws.'"

chief issue, however, is internal to the church, for the collation of the canonical epistles of the twelve holy fathers increasingly came to be set alongside the synodical canons as a core of the moral legislation of the church for the guidance of the empire. The chief turning point in this ongoing and incremental process of canonical collections is the Synod in Trullo (the domed hall of the imperial palace), in 692. Its decrees, with the strong encouragement of Justinian II, formally gave the patristic canonical literature full legal status alongside the synodical judgments, and thus, force in civil law as well. No emperor any longer had the authority to ignore, amend, or reverse them. It is abundantly clear from the workings of the church lawyers at the Synod in Trullo that an archaizing spirit already had entered into the process of accumulating church law (even more than civil law) and that there was little chance of a significant synod composing new canons that differed from the patristic precedents.

The nomocanons of the Middle Byzantine era, and the *Erotapokriseis* of the *chartophylakes* that followed them, have attracted little interest to date although they are the loci where late Byzantine thinkers turn their minds to issues of polity, culture, and a philosophy of freedom under law.⁹ The consolidation of the genre of nomocanon in the ninth century, however, made for an increasingly tight bond between ecclesiastic legislation and state law. This effectively made the early and late fourth-century canonical decisions on warfare, found only in two or three sources, the definitive religious answer to the ethical problems involved in the shedding of blood for the best part of the succeeding millennium.

Early Twentieth-Century Studies on Early Christianity and War

So much for a rapid introduction to some form of global matrix for deciding what principles formed Byzantine religious attitudes. Such a prelude, though apparently vague, is particularly necessary to the consideration of what might constitute Byzantine attitudes toward war

theory, for that question too is a big one. Previous discussions of it among theologians and historians have been quite evidently capable of producing widely contrasting results. When scholars over several generations produce a literature that cannot agree on basics or that contradicts itself in its key findings, something is amiss. When a large literature over a considerable time span registers so diverse conclusions, either the sources have not been exegeted properly or the terms of the question posed have some inherent problematic.

It has long been a cliché in mid- to late twentieth-century religious scholarship (particularly Protestant forms) that the church was pacifist in character up to Constantine and then became progressively warlike as it was corrupted by imperial pretensions. Byzantium is rarely considered by such scholars, since they tend to stop, exhausted by the Greek evidence they have acquired up to Eusebios of Caesarea (where the story only really starts); if the later empire does get a vapid mention, it usually does not fare well. It is all too often dismissed in the Gibbonesque caricature of a Caesaro-papist system that takes its war ethic from the incumbent administration. It is a view that I have myself caricatured elsewhere.¹⁰ Suffice it here to say that no sufficient evidence is usually offered for this widespread and jaundiced view. It is a macro-thesis that can be sustained only by straining the historical facts as well as witnessing the continuance of some disturbing colonialist agendas that have already been marked in relation to the manner in which Byzantine intellectual history was regarded in the early part of the twentieth century.

The purpose here is to come at the question of how the Byzantines approached a theology or ethic of war with a new statement of methodological principles and with a slightly broader consideration of a range of evidences. I want especially to see how the topic works in the light of biblical exegesis as this was performed in Byzantium—not as it was done by modern interpreters reading it in backwards—and by a primary consideration of the Greek canons.

9 See further J. A. McGuckin, *The Ascent of Christian Law: Patristic and Byzantine Reformulations of Antique Civilization* (New York, 2012). Nomocanons are so called because the Byzantine canonical treatises from the ninth century onward collate civil law (*nomos*, relating to church affairs) alongside the ecclesiastical canons (*kanones*).

10 J. A. McGuckin, "The Legacy of the Thirteenth Apostle: Origins of the East-Christian Conceptions of Church-State Relation," *SVThQ* 47, nos. 3–4 (2003): 251–88; idem, "Orthodoxy and Western Christianity: The Original European Culture War?" in *Orthodoxy and Western Culture: A Collection of Essays Honoring Jaroslav Pelikan on His Eightieth Birthday*, ed. V. Hotchkiss and P. Henry (New York, 2005), 85–107.

The previous literature on the church and war had tended to be produced in the immediate aftermath of large global conflicts, especially the First (1914–18) and Second (1939–45) World Wars. English-language early church scholarship was so tightly bonded, both in Britain and the United States, with German scholars in the patristic and biblical fields that both these conflicts produced a flurry of postwar reconciliation efforts among both subsets of professors of Bible and church history. The prelude to the World War I era saw Adolf von Harnack (awarded his noble “von” prefix by the admiring Kaiser Wilhelm II) produce his highly influential *Militia Christi* in 1905. The Catholic scholar Cecil John Cadoux, soon after the ending of the carnage of the First World War, produced a strong reaction to Harnack in 1919. In the aftermath of the Second World War, which had so soon followed that so-called war to end wars, both biblical and early church scholars were shocked that leading lights among the religious establishment could have so easily advocated nationalist policies of aggression. Gerhard Kittel, the editor and doyen of the century’s most prestigious New Testament encyclopedia, was almost a party chaplain for the Nazis and wrote a learned rationalization of how Jesus ought not to be considered Jewish at all, since he came from the “Galilee of the Gentiles.”¹¹ At the same time, what had survived of the Russian Orthodox hierarchy chimed in with Stalin’s war efforts and gained some respite from their massive suppression because of it. Many in the Anglican theological establishment more or less made all Allied efforts into a holy cause, a sacred justification that still resonates today and was not even dented by such blatant departures from classical Western just war theory as the bombing of civilian targets, most notably (and controversially) symbolized in the destructions of Dresden, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki.

The works of Roland Bainton and Edward Ryan set the tone for the second stratum of church and war studies,¹² which was then taken up by a third wave of pro-pacifist religious scholars—Mennonites, anti-Vietnam theologians, and anti-nuclear theoreticians

11 First published in German as *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* (Stuttgart, 1933), translated as G. Kittel, *A Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. G. Friedrich and G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI, 1964).

12 See R. H. Bainton, “The Early Church and War,” *HTR* 39 (1946): 189–212; E. Ryan, “The Rejection of Military Service by the Early Church,” *TheolSt* 13 (1952): 1–32.

prominent among them—from the 1960s through the 1980s. What is troubling about most of them is that they generally decontextualize their historical evidence, having been carried away by the moral fervor of their (anti-war) cause. This happened in two chief ways as blind spots among the theologians who sometimes tended (in that era) to be less than sophisticated as historians.

First, they omit substantive references to Eastern sources, being fundamentally Latinists in education and religiously primed along the Catholic-Protestant default line of Reformation apologetic. “Cadoux versus Harnack” is a prime example of the kind of sparing that continued through the 1980s.¹³ Second, almost all of the religious theorists wrote before the so-called higher criticism of the Bible had established itself in schools and before it too had given way before the philosophy of deconstructionism. It is not implied here that this meant that these theorists were thereby benighted souls, merely that their approach to the scriptural evidence tended to take the form of a concordance mentality: they assembled biblical citations as proof-texts, without much regard to the manner in which they had been adopted by the church at large, presuming instead that if something appeared in the scripture it had to be a Christian axiom *de facto*. In other words, they made a fatal error in presuming they knew what Christian exegesis was, by reference to their own generation’s presuppositions, and dispensed themselves from dealing with patristic and Byzantine exegesis firsthand. This is a scholarly lapse for which we may pardon them, for at that time there existed no common manuals of analysis of these matters.¹⁴

If, however, one looks at the manner in which the extensive biblical references to war and violence are dealt with in Eastern Christian literature, it is evident

13 C. J. Cadoux, *The Early Christian Attitude to War* (London, 1919); A. von Harnack, *Militia Christi: The Christian Religion and the Military in the First Three Centuries*, trans. D. McInnes (Philadelphia, 1981; original German, Tübingen, 1905).

14 Now there are several, such as J. Quasten, *Patrology*, vols. 1–3 (Utrecht, 1972–75); M. Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church: An Historical Introduction to Patristic Exegesis* (Edinburgh, 1994); A. J. Hauser and D. F. Watson, *A History of Biblical Interpretation*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI, 2003); and the exhaustive synopsis by C. Kannengiesser, *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis* (Leiden, 2006). Since their works on the church and war were of a compendium character, these scholars did not have time to do the groundwork themselves. The lack of such patristic compendia severely limited them.

that these are generally interpreted as apocalyptic ciphers, symbols that stand for something else: Next Age references to the Eschaton—the image of how the world will be rolled up and assessed once universal justice is imposed by God on his recalcitrant and rebellious creation. Biblical descriptions of violence and war, in most of Christianity's classical exposition of its biblical heritage, rather than being straightforward depictions of the life and values of This World Order, are thus read and passed on as eschatological allegories. To confound the two orders,¹⁵ taking war images of the apocalyptic dimension for instances of how the world (here) ought to be managed, is a gross distortion of the ancient literature.¹⁶ This has become increasingly a problem among religious theorists in Western church literature since the late medieval period, an era that saw the introduction of new normative ways of reading the Bible (especially by the Protestant reformers) that radically ousted ancient allegorist interpretations of scripture in favor of historicist and literalist readings of the ancient texts.¹⁷

Earliest Christian Evidence(s)

Most Christian writings of the very early period are remarkably pacific, and advocate communities to acquiesce to political authority peaceably. Such is the message

of Paul, who encourages Christians to be good citizens and taxpayers and to pray for the welfare of their rulers. His texts could be found set into the mosaic floors of Byzantine tax offices for centuries.¹⁸ Similarly, in the pastoral epistles, and the letters of Clement, the earliest theologians argue that the churches ought to be models of good citizenship. Military images, which abound in Paul more than those of most New Testament writers,¹⁹ are generally rendered into allegories of spiritual readiness. Clement of Rome, in his letter to the Corinthians, composed just after Domitian's savage purge of Christians circa 96–98, still expresses admiration for the military profession and elevates the armies of Rome as examples of good spiritual discipline from which church communities could learn.²⁰

Those farther from imperial centers showed more hostility to the concept of the armies of Rome. The Syrian Tatian sees the military profession as an unmitigated evil, reminding readers that the earliest ecclesiastical attitudes to it consistently numbered it along with prostitution and magic as inadmissible professions debarring their practitioners from enrollment in the ranks of the catechumenate.²¹ When Bishop Gregory of Nazianzos writes in his late fourth-century letters to his Christian friends in the upper echelons of the army, however, he is able to make a polite joke that as long as they do not wear their uniform to church, they will not scandalize the locals.²² The second-century North African theologian Tertullian was the first serious Christian writer to engage the problem of war as an ethical notion. His constantly dubious attitude to the Christian profession of arms in the overwhelmingly polytheistic environment of the army gave way in his later work to the position that soldiering was inherently incompatible with belief in Christ.²³ Most

15 This is what the ancient sources described as the Two Ages—This Age, a period of turmoil that stands within the historical record and permits brutal oppression as the ultimate symbol of the Beast, which is evil personified, and the Other Age, or Next Age, which is the transcendent Kingdom of God when peace will be established by the definitive ending of violent powers hostile to the good and the comforting of the poor.

16 It is a major category mistake, therefore, to apply apocalyptically matrixed scriptural references to “war in the heavens spilling out on earth” as authoritative justifications from the Bible for Christians to engage in violent conflict for political ends. The essence of biblical, apocalyptic doctrine is that the Two Ages must never be conflated or confused. They cannot be ushered in by political victories gained in This Age. By this means, Christianity, in its foundational vision, undercut the principles that continue to inspire Judaism and Islam with their (essentially) non-apocalyptic understandings of the spreading of the Kingdom of God on Earth within recognizable borders and militarily if necessary. Very few theologians in the ancient church ever forgot this.

17 As if, for example, the biblical narratives of the Pentateuch, where God commands Moses and Joshua to slaughter the Canaanite inhabitants in the process of seizing the Promised Land, were to be read literally as both vindicating war for “righteous reasons” and validating the forced appropriation of territories after conflict. Orthodox did not read scripture in this way.

18 A fine example of the same exists at Caesarea Maritima. The mosaic of the tax collector in Great Logothete Theodore Metochites' church of Chora is another variant example. See P. Underwood, *The Kariye Djami*, vol. 2, *The Mosaics* (New York, 1966), 159–65.

19 See 1 Thess. 5:8; Rom. 13:12; Eph. 6:10–17; 2 Tim. 2:3.

20 Clement, *To the Corinthians* 37 (PG 1:281–85).

21 Tatian, *Oration to the Greeks* 11.1, 19.2, 23.12 (PG 6:829).

22 Gregory of Nazianzos, *Epistle 86: St. Grégoire de Nazianze: Lettres*, ed. P. Gallay (Paris, 1964), 1:1107.

23 Tertullian, *De Patientia* 3 (PL 2:120): “He [Jesus] did not approve the avenging sword of even one disciple. The patience of the Lord was wounded in [the wound of] Malchus. And so, he cursed for the time to come (*maledixit in posterum*) the works of the sword.”

of this negativity, however, seems to be explicable on the grounds that there were so many calls upon a soldier to engage in pagan cultic acts, even in such an ordinary act as collecting one's pay, and to show respect to the genius of the emperor. Whereas many regarded these as civic acts, other more zealous Christians elevated them as life or death decisions.²⁴ Tertullian, himself the son of a pagan centurion, knew military life intimately and had come to the conclusion that it tended to corrupt Christian zeal. He has been inflated as a pacifist authority, when he really was speaking as a practical missionary.

Clement of Alexandria, shortly after Tertullian, was equally forthright and negative. To him, soldiering was nothing other than a machination of the devil,²⁵ and he is echoed by the third-century author Cyprian of Carthage,²⁶ a former member of the pagan curia of Carthage who went on as a bishop-martyr to have a significant afterlife in Byzantium as a canonical authority. Both writers had the benefit of seeing how easily the machinery of the state could be turned against the church. The fourth-century Latin apologist Lactantius is a rare voice, however, because his objections to the military are not concerned, as are the others, with individual matters of right and wrong, but with a more global view. He denounces war as evil because it is the machinery of murder attempting to masquerade as patriotism or a special category of "invasion." He wryly notes that if an individual pillages and kills a neighbor, he would be denounced as heartless, but if a nation—he is criticizing the great Roman heroes—wades in blood as it subdues other lands and peoples, it is generally praised as a great "peacemaker."²⁷ Yet Lactantius, throughout his diatribe titled *Deaths of the Persecutors*,

equally advocates and supports Constantine as God's chosen ruler. For him, God has elevated this emperor above all others, strongly implying that Constantine was given his victory in the civil war on this account, simply because he alone protected and nurtured the church. No criticism of Constantine is allowed, and Lactantius functioned happily as *comes illustrissimus* in Constantine's western court. Even as a pacific theologian, therefore (and rare on that account), he knew very well how Constantine had assumed power—by a very bloody ascent.²⁸

Eusebios of Caesarea, another of Constantine's panegyricists, cannot deny that war is an unmitigated calamity,²⁹ generally speaking, but he seamlessly glides over issues as he depicts Constantine, as Roman *imperator*, now receiving blessing from a new god of war (no longer Mars, but Christ) as he instructs his soldiers to write the new divine cipher of the labarum on their shields.³⁰ It is Eusebios who tells us that the labarum is really the Chi-Rho, but we do not have evidence before him, literary or archaeological, that Christians had ever heard of the Chi-Rho as a cipher of Jesus. After Eusebios, of course, it is the primary Christian logo of the fourth century.

The Constantinian age changed attitudes, but it was not a move from pacifism to militarism. Christians were now a dominant force within the army and the imperial court whereas before they had been a minority, a fact that alarmed Diocletian and Galerius considerably, and led to the outbreak of the Great Persecution. They were such a force that even years of purges could not unseat them, and after Constantine they would not be ready to relinquish power again. After the fourth century, however, they had to face a new context for ethical reflection. It was easy enough for theorists to argue a radical pacifist position before the church had responsibility for being the moral guidance of the state, but how could Christianity now claim to guide a new political order without a readiness to bless war? Would it not be the case, as the philosopher Celsus had once

In *On the Crowns of Soldiers* 13 (PL 2:90), he says, "When a man has become a believer, and faith has been sealed, there must be either an immediate abandonment of the military profession, which has been the course of action among many of us; or all sorts of quibbling will have to be resorted to in order to avoid offending God, and that is not allowed even outside of military service."

24 Tertullian, *On Idolatry* 19 (PL 1:767–68), and *On the Crowns of Soldiers* (PL 2:77, 2:83). In *On the Crowns* 7 (PL 2:87), Tertullian describes the military lifestyle as among "those things which belong to demons."

25 Clement, *Stromateis* 5.126.5 (PG 9:81–84).

26 Cyprian, *To Donatus* 6, in *Cypriani Opera Omnia*, ed. G. Hartel, CSEL 3.1 (Vienna, 1868), 8.

27 Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, 6.20.15–17 (PL 6:707).

28 Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* [*De la mort des persécuteurs*], ed. J. Moreau (Paris, 1954).

29 Eusebios, *Church History* 1.2 (PG 20:61–64).

30 Eusebios, *Life of Constantine* 2.4 (PG 20:981). In the *Life of Constantine* 4.56 (PG 20:1208), Eusebios lauds the emperor for taking bishops with him on his Persian campaign and notes that they set up a tent in the camp where prayers were offered ceaselessly for the victory of the army.

mockingly claimed in the second century, that in the unlikely event that there ever was a Christian emperor, he would have to be a hopelessly pacifist one and would thus leave Rome to be ravaged by its enemies?³¹ It is in this context that one sees the first payback that the church gave to Constantine. The Council of Arles, which he had summoned in 314, anathematized deserters from the army who were Christian.³²

Several importantly situated church writers, including Eusebios of Caesarea or Ambrose of Milan, were perhaps content to allow the God of the armies to change, from pagan to Christian, and then continue with military politics much as before. The sense of a profound sea-change from Roman pagan theodicy was, nevertheless, widely remarked. A much more pacific philosophy had entered into the heart of Roman moral thinking in the Christian empire. It is instructive to see how later Byzantine ages always preferred negotiated settlement to brute force of arms, and it is one of the fundamental reasons that historians, beginning with Ammianus Marcellinus in the fifth century and continued by Gibbon in the eighteenth, denounced Christianity as the culprit that destabilized the empire—through its condemnation of the idea of aggressive war and its advancement of the justification for military action being lodged solely in the concept of self-defense. There are, of course, innumerable strategic reasons why a politics of aggression should be conducted by remote diplomatic means as much as by firsthand engagement, but one should not remove from that list of reasons that the Byzantine foreign service negotiated because it had been formed based on a pro-peace religious philosophy.

The Canonical Letters of St. Basil the Great

Two perhaps conflicting tendencies comprise a typical Byzantine attitude to war: namely, that emperors

and generals had specific ideas of what was required of them, and that theologians and bishops had ideas too.³³ Sometimes they overlapped, and sometimes they did not, much as today. This is demonstrated abundantly by a source that above all others can stand as the core religious text governing Byzantine theological attitudes to war. It is not a treatise, but a canonical collection of patristic advice from St. Basil the Great on how to cleanse the faithful from degrees of defilement before they approach the Eucharist.³⁴ Basil, after the fifth century, had a strong reputation in the church.³⁵ His canonical letters, however, tended to assume a universal authority for the Byzantine church chiefly after their collation and dissemination as the Ninety-two Canons of St. Basil by the Synod in Trullo in the late seventh century. After the ninth century, they were an indisputable and core part of Byzantine church law.

Basil was a fourth-century metropolitan bishop in territory near an imperial frontier zone. He agonized over the whole idea of war, as something that was inherently incompatible with the gospel of Love, but he knew as a religious and political leader of the Cappadocian Caesarean church, in an important crossroads city on the major military route eastwards through Armenia Minor, that he had to deal with incursions and war-related problems (for example, murder, homicide,

33 Some of the argumentation concerning St. Basil of Caesarea's role in this process has been treated by me earlier in "Nonviolence and Peace Traditions."

34 The canonical epistles of St. Basil, otherwise known as the Ninety-two Canons, in *Pedalion*, ed. E. Deledemou (Thessalonike, 1987), 586–648. They can be found in English in *The Rudder (Pedalion) of the Metaphorical Ship of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church of Orthodox Christians*, trans. D. Cumming (Chicago, 1957; repr. 1983), 772–864.

35 Basil's canonical epistles were transmitted wherever monasticism went. In the Eastern church of antiquity, because monasticism was the substructure of the spread of the Christian movement, this more or less meant his canonical views, given that he was the "father of monks," became the standard paradigm of Orthodoxy's theoretical approach to the morality of war and violence although the writings were local and occasional in origin. Basil's ninety-two epistles were adapted by various ecumenical councils of the church that followed his time. His writing was quoted as authoritative in Canon 2 of the Sixth Ecumenical Council of Constantinople (681), which paraphrases much else from his canonical epistles, and was formally validated in Canon 1 of the Seventh Ecumenical Council of Nicaea (787). By such affirmations, Basil's canonical epistles entered the core of the nomocanons of the Byzantine church and remain authoritative to this day.

31 It is not until the middle of the third century that Christians could find an answer to the deliberate mockery that a Christian military policy would be disastrous by its very nature. Origen addresses it in his *Contra Celsum* 8.68–71 (PG 11:1620) and asserts that it is a foolish argument. The patristic writers of the later fourth century show their awareness of the new polity problem only gradually and partially. The same question reemerges at the center of a massively elaborated refutation in Augustine's *De Civitate Dei*. It was asked of him because the pagan senator Volusianus had accused Christian senators at Rome of being morally responsible for the humiliation of the city by Alaric in 410.

32 Council of Arles, Canon 3, in *Concilia Galliae*, ed. C. Munier (Turnhout, 1963), 14–22.

rape, and theft) on a regular basis. A parallel form of guidance is found in one of the earliest collections of church canons, the *Apostolic Tradition*, and the *Canons of Hippolytus*, which castigate involvement in war as inherently defiling and a matter (the spilling of human blood) that debars someone from admission to the sacraments unless a penitential process is first undertaken.³⁶ These canons were presented as being from the apostolic period, but they were exposed as a literary fraud in the seventh century. They actually emanate from fourth-century Syria, but appealed to an “apostolic age” to provide their strictures weightier authority. Basil’s canons are almost contemporaneous with the allegedly earlier collections, and since they emanate from a leading intelligence of the day, and from a real-world circumstance, it is Basil’s treatment of ethics that can be taken as more genuinely demonstrative of the mainstream ideas circulating in the fourth century than these pseudepigrapha. Basil has this to say:

τοὺς ἐν πολέμοις φόνους οἱ πατέρες ἡμῶν ἐν τοῖς φόνοις οὐκ ἐλογίσαντο, ἐμοὶ δοκεῖ, συγγνώμην δόντες τοῖς ὑπὲρ σωφροσύνης καὶ εὐσεβείας ἀμυνομένοις. Τάχα δὲ καλῶς ἔχει συμβουλεύειν, ὥς τὰς χεῖρας μὴ καθαρούς, τριῶν ἐτῶν τῆς κοινωνίας μόνῃς ἀπέχεσθαι.³⁷

The balance and sense of discretion is remarkable in this little comment, one that bears much weight in terms of Eastern Orthodox understandings of the morality of war. The indeterminate “fathers” in question is a tactful rhetorical allusion to Athanasios of Alexandria, the great Nicene Orthodox authority of the fourth-century church. Athanasios’s defense of the Nicene Creed and the divine status of Christ had won him immense

prestige by the time of his death in 373, and as his works were being collated and disseminated when Basil was writing in 375—in his own lifetime, Athanasios’s reputation had been highly conflicted, he had been exiled numerous times, and his writings had been proscribed by imperial censors—St. Basil seems to wish to add a cautionary note: that not everything a father of the church has to say is equally momentous or universally authoritative. In his *Letter to Amun*, Athanasios had apparently come out straightforwardly about the legitimacy of killing in time of war, writing,

ἐπεὶ καὶ τῶν ἄλλων, τῶν ἐν τῷ βίῳ γινομένων, εὐρήσομεν τὰς διαφορὰς κατὰ τι γινομένας· οἷον φονεύειν οὐκ ἔξεστιν, ἀλλ’ ἐν πολέμοις ἀναιρεῖν τοὺς ἀντιπάλους καὶ εὖνομον καὶ ἐπαίνου ἄξιον. Οὕτω γοῦν καὶ τιμῶν μεγάλων οἱ κατὰ πόλεμον ἀριστεύσαντες ἀξιοῦνται, καὶ στήλαι τούτων ἐγείρονται κηρύττουσαι τὰ κατορθώματα. ὥστε τὸ αὐτὸ κατὰ τι μὲν καὶ κατὰ καιρὸν οὐκ ἔξεστι, κατὰ τι δὲ καὶ εὐκαίρως ἀφίεται καὶ συγκεχώρηται.³⁸

This saying was being circulated, and given authority as a patristic witness for the morality of war simply because it had come from Athanasios. In fact, although it has also been trotted out by modern commentators who use it as evidence for a robust pro-war attitude in Byzantine religious circles, the original letter had nothing whatsoever to do with war. The example of the war hero is a sardonic reference *ad hominem* since the letter was addressed to an aged leader of the Egyptian monks who described themselves as *asketes*, that is, those who labored and fought as spiritual warriors for the virtuous life. The military image is entirely incidental, and Athanasios in context merely uses it to illustrate his chief point, which is to discuss the canonical query the

36 *Canons of Hippolytus* 14.74, in *The Canons of Hippolytus*, ed. P. Bradshaw (Bramcote, 1987), 34: “A Christian should not volunteer to become a soldier, unless he is compelled to do this by someone in authority. He can have a sword, but he should not be commanded to shed blood. If it can be shown that he has shed blood he should stay away from the mysteries [sacraments] at least until he has been purified through tears and lamentation.”

37 Basil, *Letter* 188 (ca. 375), Canon 13, in Deledemou, *Pedalion*, 599; Cummings, *Pedalion*, 801: “Our fathers did not consider killings committed in the course of wars to be classifiable as murders at all, on the score, it seems to me, of allowing a pardon to men fighting in defence of sobriety and piety. Perhaps, though, it might be advisable to refuse them communion for three years, on the ground that their hands are not clean.”

38 Athanasios, *Epistle* 48, *To Amun* (PG 26:1173): “Although one is not supposed to kill, the killing of the enemy in time of war is both a lawful and praiseworthy thing. This is why we consider individuals who have distinguished themselves in war as being worthy of great honors, and indeed public monuments are set up to celebrate their achievements. It is evident, therefore, that at one particular time, and under one set of circumstances, an act is not permissible, but when time and circumstances are right, it is both allowed and condoned.” Complete English translation in A. Robertson, *St. Athanasius: Select Works and Letters*, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Church 4 (New York, 1891; repr. Grand Rapids, 1980), 556–57.

Abba Amun had sent to him as his local archbishop, namely: Did nocturnal emissions count as sins debarring reception of the Eucharist for desert celibates? Athanasios replies to the effect that with human sexuality, as with all sorts of other things, the context of the activity determines what is moral, not some absolute disconnected principle that is superimposed on moral discussion from the outset. Many ancients, Christian and pagan, regarded sexual activity as inherently defiling, and here Athanasios decidedly takes leave of them. His argument, therefore, is falsely attributed when it is read out of context as an apparent justification of killing in time of war. He is not actually condoning the practice at all, merely using the rhetorical example of current opinion to show Amun that contextual variability is important in making moral judgments.

In his turn Basil wishes to make it abundantly clear for his Christian audience that such a reading of Athanasios, if applied to the church's tradition on war, is simplistic and that it is just plain wrong-headed to conclude that the issue ceases to be problematic if one is able to dig up a justificatory proof text from scripture or patristic tradition (as some seem to have been doing already with these words of a venerable father). Consequently, he sets out a nuanced and corrective exegesis of what the church's canon law *should* be in terms of fighting in time of hostilities. One of the ways he does this is to attribute this aphorism of Athanasios to indeterminate "fathers," who can then be legitimately corrected by taking a stricter view than they appeared to allow. He also carefully sets his own context. What he speaks about is the canonical regulation of war in which a Christian can engage and be amerced.³⁹ All other armed conflicts are implicitly excluded as not being appropriate to Christian morality. Basil's text on war needs, therefore, to be understood in terms of an economic reflection on the ancient canons that straightforwardly forbade the shedding of blood. The reasons he gives for suggesting that killing in time of hostilities could be distinguished from voluntary murder pure and simple—for which the canonical penalty was a lifelong ban from admission to churches and from the sacraments—is set out as the "defense of sobriety and piety." This is code language for the defense of Christian borders from the ravages of pagan marauders.

The difficulty St. Basil had to deal with was not war on a large scale, but local tribal insurgents who were mounting attacks on Roman border towns with extensive rapinage. In such circumstances, the Caesarean bishop has little patience for those who do not feel they can fight because of religious scruples. His sentiment is more that a passive noninvolvement betrays the Christian family, especially its weaker members who cannot defend themselves but need others to help them, against the ravages of men without heart or conscience to restrain them. The implication of his argument, then, is that the provocation to fighting that Christians ought at some stage accept, to defend the honor and safety of the weak, will be inherently a limited and adequate response, mainly because the honor and tradition of the Christian faith (piety and sobriety) in the hearts and minds of the warriors will restrict the bloodshed to a necessary minimum. His "economic" solution nevertheless makes it abundantly clear that the absolute standard of Christian morality turns away from war, which is an unmitigated evil. This is why one can note that the primary reason Basil gives—that previous fathers had distinguished killing in time of war from the case of simple murder—was "on the score of allowing a pardon." There was no distinction made here in terms of the qualitative horror of the deed itself, but rather in terms of the way in which the deed could be cleansed by the church's system of penance.

Basil's episcopal solution to the problem was essentially to advise his local Christian militia that acting out their military duty to punish the perpetrators of the attacks was a legitimate exercise of the obedience of duty. Even so, he argues, if they spilled blood, they would still be debarred from communion for several years; if they refused to fight, they would be equally guilty in the eyes of God, for then they would be responsible for not protecting the innocent. Clergy, who represented the church as a pure type of Christian, were under no circumstances allowed to take up arms or engage in violence or killing. If they spilled blood, they could not function any longer as ministers of the altar. Basil took his position from the lead of the book of Numbers, which advocated a period of withdrawal for purposes of cleansing for the Israelite warriors who

39 That is, find canonical forgiveness for shedding blood, an act that is canonically prohibited.

had shed blood, even at God's commandment, in the course of the taking of the Promised Land.⁴⁰

If one asks the question—is it logical to expect a Christian to engage in the defense of the homeland while simultaneously penalizing him if he spills blood in the process?—one needs to contextualize the debarment from the sacrament in the generic fourth-century practice of the reception of the Eucharist, which did not expect regular communication (ritual preparation was extensive and involved fasting and almsgiving and prayer) and where a sizeable minority (if not the majority) of adult Christians in a given church would not have yet been initiated by means of baptism and were thus not bound to keep all the canons of the church. The returning victor presumably would have received many public honors and the gratitude of the local folk, but by Basil's regulation, and by the ritual exclusion of the illumined warrior from the sacrament, the bishop is making sure at least one public sign is given to the entire community that the Gospel standard has no place for war, violence, and organized death. He is trying to sustain an eschatological balance: war is not part of the Kingdom of God (signified in the Eucharistic ritual as arriving in the present) but is part of the bloody and greed-driven reality of world affairs that is the Kingdom-Not-Arrived. By moving in and out of eucharistic reception, Basil's faithful Christian, returning from his duty with blood on his hands, is now in the modality of expressing his dedication to the values of peace and innocence by means of the lamentation and repentance for life that has been taken, albeit the blood of the violent. Basil's arrangement that the returning noble warrior should stand inside the church and thus be present at the Eucharist—not debarred from it by standing in the outer porch, where the public sinners were allocated spaces—but refrain from Communion (and thus made to abstain from the Eucharist not as an excommunicated sinner but as defiled member of the Church) makes the statement that a truly honorable termination of war for a Christian has to be an honorable repentance.

40 Num. 31:19–24. It is apposite to note here that this subtle biblical exegete does not elevate the invasion of the Promised Land as an ethical paradigm—a *typos* giving permission for hostilities—but does elevate the scriptural commandments to purify after bloodshedding as such a typological paradigm.

Several commentators, not least many of the later Western church fathers, have regarded this as fudge, but it seems to express in a finely tuned economic way the tension in the basic Christian message that there is an unresolvable shortfall between the ideal and the real in an apocalyptically charged religion. What this Basilian canon does most effectively is to hold up a No Entry sign in front of any potential theory of just war within Christian theology and should establish a decided refusal of postwar church-sponsored self-congratulations for victory. All violence, whether individual, local, or national, is here declared to be an expression of hubris inconsistent with the values of the Kingdom of God. Although in many circumstances that violence may be considered necessary or unavoidable, Basil states the only legitimate reasons as the defense of the weak and innocent, it is never justifiable. Even for the best motives in the world, the shedding of blood remains a defilement such that the true Christian afterward would wish to undergo the cathartic experience of temporary return to the lifestyle of penance, that is, be penitent. Basil's restriction of the time of penance to three years, which is seemingly harsh to moderns, was actually a commonly recognized sign of merciful leniency in the ancient rule book of the early church.⁴¹

This ancient set of canons may seem quaintly archaic to many readers today, but they serve as interesting boundary markers because they handicapped the medieval imperial church under the emperors in erecting a theology of holy war, or just war, despite the many temptations to do so as Islamic forces systematically eroded the borders of Byzantium. Basically, Basil canonically blocks movement toward a Byzantine just war theory by proposing a view that regards limited military defensive or punitive actions as the least of evils needed to safeguard the good of protecting the innocent. While just war theory slowly gained ground in the Latin West,⁴² nothing like this appeared in the

41 Ordinary murder was given a twenty-year debarment from the church's sacraments as well as all accruing civic penalties: Basil, Canon 56, in Cummings, *Pedalion*, 827. Manslaughter received a ten-year debarment: idem, Canon 57, *ibid.*, 828.

42 It was developed especially (out of Cicero) by St. Ambrose of Milan (*De officiis* 1.176 [PL 16:80]) and St. Augustine (*Epistle* 183.15, PL 33:531–32, and *Against Faustus* 22.69–76 [PL 42:444]). See also L. J. Swift, *The Early Fathers on War and Military Service: Message of the Fathers of the Church* (Wilmington, DE, 1983), 110–49. Ambrose, however, specifically commands his priests to have no

professional (episcopal) Greek religious sources, partly because Basil retained immense authority, reaffirmed dramatically by the Synod in Trullo in 692 and the Photian edition of the nomocanons, both being reiterations of Basil's canonical weight at significant moments in the Byzantine struggle with Islam. There are many indications among Byzantine politicians that they were happy enough to presume that Byzantium engaged in holy war because it is Christian, whereas rebels and alien nations were the symbolic beasts mentioned in Scripture as ravaging God's vineyard.⁴³ These attitudes, however, could never evolve strategically toward a just war theory because of this canonical *impedimentum*.⁴⁴

Warrior Theology in Later Byzantium

Basil, however, was not the last word, or the only word, on the subject in Byzantine religious experience, because the canons of the church were not the only force that drove religious reflections and dogmatic constructs. One must add to the grist other theological forces, such as monastic attitudes, liturgical conceptions, and hagiographies, to name only a few of the more prominent forces. In regard to the first, one needs to consider the extent of the Athonite defensive towers to understand that Byzantine monks, while they never developed a justificatory holy war theory comparable in any respect to the Templars, were not averse to defending their lives, their churches, or their property. While it remained true that any priest or deacon spilling blood would be liturgically made redundant, this

involvement (in inciting or approving) the practice of war or judicial punishments.

43 See Ps. 74:19, 79:2, 80:8–13; Ez. 34:18; and Hosea 2:12.

44 Some of the later Latin writers were overtly "patriotic." Ambrose praised the very idea of military faithfulness and used it as an example to his congregation. He also lists the strength of a warrior among the chief virtues he can think of (*De officiis* 1.129 [PL 16:56]). Gregory of Tours was even more explicitly warlike. He is, indeed, one of the first examples of a bellicose bishop, a type that would make its appearance more extensively in the early Latin Middle Ages. Gregory urges Christian princes not to hesitate to make war when necessary for the defense or even the extension of the faith. Augustine was the first Latin to attempt a systematic moral justification of the profession of arms. He took the basic ideas of just war from Cicero (*De officiis* 1.11–13, ed. W. Miller, Loeb 21 [London and Cambridge, MA, 1975], 35–45) and set out what would be the terms and conditions of a Christian just war among the Latins (Augustine, *Epistle*, 138.15 [PL 33:531–32], and *Against Faustus*, 22:69–76 [PL 42:444]).

did not apply to nonordained monastics. One can presume from the sophistication of the defensive towers on Athos that the monks did not simply throw holy water onto pirates. This is a tradition of patriotic extension of "defense theory" that runs through Byzantium and can be presumed to be operative in many local instances; the warrior saints are highly revered in all of Byzantine history as can be discerned from the iconography and the practices of devotion. Saints such as the great martyrs George and Demetrios, the soldier saints Theodore the Tyro and Theodore Stratelates,⁴⁵ and numerous others, not least the common practice of depicting the archangel Michael as the Great Strategos, all suggest that soldier saints were regarded as great protectors of the Christian Byzantines precisely *because* they were warriors. In other words, it is not, as some have suggested, because they were pacific martyrs—like the Russian princes Boris and Gleb, passion bearers who chose death rather than fighting—that they were immensely popular saints, but because they were expected to be able to come out of heaven as strong warriors of God, just as they had been righteous warriors on earth, and uphold and protect the people of God against their many mortal enemies.⁴⁶

The era of Heraclius also provides an indication (as later in the time of Nikephoros Phokas) that a sense of Byzantium being engaged in a holy war for survival was commonplace. The sense of shock at the loss of the relic of the Holy Cross to the Persians was unquestionably a prime motive for Heraclius's extensive preparations of his army to regain the cross at all costs. The clash with Zoroastrian ideology that had laid the cross prone before Ahura Mazda was a core around which Heraclius's imperial ideas about repristinating the imperial borders accumulated. When the armies brought back the cross, it was also an occasion for creating a major new festival that adapted and developed the old Constantinian feast of the Discovery of the Cross. After Heraclius, the celebration became the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, marked on 14 September. The popularity of this festival soon universalized it in the Orthodox world, and from that day to this, it remains a core liturgical experience around

45 Theodore the Tyro and Theodore Stratelates, the recruit and the general, were probably originally one and the same.

46 Further, see H. Delehay, *Les légendes grecques des saints militaires* (Paris, 1909).

which an Orthodox theology of patriotic values has been created. One need look only briefly at the central *troparia* of that feast in the liturgical Menaion to see the ethos of what is going on. These troparia were so popular that they eventually entered the services of the daily hours. The first one is a straightforward celebration of the cross as *tropaion*:

We venerate your most holy Cross, O Christ, as an unconquerable token of victory, an invincible shield, a sceptre divine, whereby the world has been saved, and Adam rejoices.⁴⁷

Another, attributed to Emperor Leo and also in the Menaion, is an apotropaic hymn:

O three-branched Cross of Christ, you are my strong protection.
Sanctify me by your power that I may venerate and glorify you in faith and love.⁴⁸

Yet another is a song of gladness that a prostrate people have been vindicated:

Hail Cross of the Lord! Divine protection of all the faithful!
You are an invincible rampart, lifting us up from the dirt.⁴⁹

In the liturgical feast, the scriptural reading at vespers associated as a chief *typos*, or prefigurement, of the Exaltation of the Cross, is the sign of Moses' outstretched arms (in the form of a cross) when he sent Joshua to fight (and destroy) Amalek, king of the Canaanites.⁵⁰ While Moses' arms were uplifted in the form of a cross, Joshua was victorious; when the arms of the prophet fell, Joshua suffered reversals. Is this an importation of a straightforward Old Testament theology of divinely validated war? It has the appearance of such, but one also needs to remember that from the third century onward, Amalek himself was the primary typological symbol of the powers of darkness. The con-

quest of Amalek in Byzantine monastic literature is, therefore, widely read as the conquering of the forces of individual sinfulness. On this reading it would again be an eschatological cipher, rather than a validation of jihad. The most politically explicit of the hymns of the festival is the *kontakion* for matins:

Lifted up of your own free will on the Cross, bestow your mercy on the new commonwealth that bears your name. Make our faithful kings glad in your strength, giving them victory over their enemies. May your Cross assist them in battle; a weapon of peace, an unconquerable ensign of victory.⁵¹

While the cross is here a trophy of victory, it is also a "weapon of peace" in the church's estimation. The troparia are festive in tone, upbeat about the security of the state and the downfall of its foes, but they never amount to anything remotely comparable to the Latin *Te Deum Laudamus*.

What has changed, most significantly, here is the altered sense of how Christians understood the cross of Jesus to be a Victory (Nike). Prior to Heraclius, this first and foremost meant a victory over the unseen powers hostile to humanity. In other words, victory over the eschatological forces of darkness. As in *De Incarnatione*, Athanasios in the mid-fourth century explains the rationale of the crucifixion as a trap in midair for terrestrial demons.⁵² The cross is, thus, a trophy that has caught and killed the hostile unseen powers. After Heraclius, it is a victory over palpable enemies—the foes of the Christian commonwealth. One of the matutinal prayers (attributed to the emperor Leo) even gets specific: the victory is against the people of Ishmael, a biblical cipher for Islam.⁵³

Peter Schreiner points out that most of the military sources are either silent on the subject of religion or at least have not yet been sufficiently scrutinized for

47 *The Festal Menaion*, ed. K. Ware and Mother Mary (London, 1969), 131–63, at 131.

48 *Ibid.*, 132.

49 *Ibid.*

50 Exod. 17:10–14.

51 Ware and Mother Mary, *Festal Menaion*, 140.

52 Athanasios, *De Incarnatione (Peri Enanthropeseos tou Theou Logou)* 25.4–6 (PG 25:140), interpreting col. 2:15.

53 The first half of the hymn, sung during the veneration of the cross, celebrates the cross as the defeat of the unseen powers of darkness; the second half goes on, "With you as their boast, O Cross, our faithful kings laid low by your might the people of Ishmael."

the details about religious attitudes that they afford.⁵⁴ Nevertheless his sense is that the army demonstrates a great slowness in terms of responding to Christian currents of thought. The military handbook of the emperor Maurice from the second half of the sixth century gives a few random details suggesting the presence of military noncombatant chaplains. One learns here that the standards were blessed before battle and that the chief military standard was the labarum—now one recalls, the standard of St. Constantine the *isapostolos*, warrior, and emperor saint—at the head of the procession. One also learns that the evening meal concluded with the collective singing of the Trisagion hymn. Since the latter was probably composed by the patriarch John Scholastikos in the latter part of the sixth century, it could not have been a long-standing custom. Before battle was engaged, a priest assigned to the army led prayers that ended with collective Kyrie Eleisons. We can deduce that these would have been Ektenies, comparable to those of vespers, petitioning God's mercy for present needs.

The tenth century was another era—after the clash of Heraclius with the Zoroastrians—when the pressure of war with Islamic forces, who were highly conscious of their theological mission to win the world, nudged Byzantium toward a more robust theology of war. Nikephoros Phokas was someone who seems to have been planning to retire to Athos with his mentor, Athanasios, the hegumen of the Great Lavra. Because of his empress, Theophano (who presumably did not relish the prospect of becoming a nun), he did not, however, get a chance to effect his retirement plans; he was removed from the world violently. Theophano received an ecclesiastical retirement, courtesy of John Tzimiskes, though unwillingly. The emperor Nikephoros is known for having introduced (or perhaps consolidated) religious practices in the army of his time. His *Praecepta* mentions that litanies were said as battle approached, ending with the Kyrie Eleison, but there is also mention of a liturgy being celebrated for the soldiers, which presumes the attendance on the field of clerical chaplains (all of whom were prohibited by canon law from taking part in any hostilities). If the battle date was fixed and known, the liturgy would be celebrated after a three-day fast imposed on the soldiers, during which

they could eat only once a day, in the evening. This is Nikephoros's account of it:

Once the plan [of engagement] is made, the general of the army should assemble all the strategoi, the officers and all the host under their command and counsel, and instruct them to purify themselves and fast for three days before the battle commences. They should follow a xerophagy,⁵⁵ and eat once a day at dusk. Each of them should expel from their soul all spitefulness, grudges, and grievances that they hold against one another. Likewise let each one make a promise of repentance to God for his other sins, so as not to be caught up in the same sins by returning to the old ways, but rather intending to live a repentant life that is pleasing to God. When these rituals have been completed in the proper manner, the priests must perform the bloodless sacrifice on the day before the battle, and when the liturgy is completed the army must partake of the holy and undefiled mysteries. And so then, with confidence, with courage, and with conviction and faith in God, let them set out against the enemy.⁵⁶

On the day of the battle itself, there were more recommended prayers:

As the enemy draws near, all the host of the army, every last person, must say the invincible prayer specific to the Christians: namely, "Lord Jesus Christ our God, have mercy on us. Amen." And in this way let them begin their advance against the enemy, calmly proceeding in formation at the appointed pace, and not making the slightest commotion or sound. Have the signal given to them either by trumpet or another

54 P. Schreiner, "The Soldier," in *The Byzantines*, ed. G. Cavallo (Chicago, 1997), 74–94.

55 A xerophagy is a fast of water and dry bread or vegetables only.

56 Nikephoros Phokas, *Praecepta Militaria* 6.33–35. The full edition may be found in Στρατηγικὴ ἔκθεσις καὶ σύνταξις Νικηφόρου δεσπότης, ed. J. A. Kulakovsky (St. Petersburg, 1908). I refer the reader to the text and versions provided by E. McGeer in his parallel Greek and English edition of the *Praecepta* in *Sowing the Dragon's Teeth: Byzantine Warfare in the Tenth Century* (Washington, D.C., 1995). McGeer offers useful commentary on the *Praecepta* as well as the full text of the *Taktika* of Nikephoros Ouranos. I have slightly adapted his version here and in the following citation.

instrument so that when the signal ends they can repeat this prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ our God, have mercy on us,” and also, “Come to the aid of us Christians, and make us worthy to rise up and fight to the death for our faith and for the sake of our brothers. Fortify and strengthen our souls and hearts and bodies, you who are the Mighty Lord of Hosts,⁵⁷ incomparable in power. We ask this through the intercession of the Mother of God⁵⁸ who bore you, and of all the saints. Amen.”⁵⁹

Holy water that had been washed over the holiest of the Passion relics of Byzantium was sprinkled over the troops.⁶⁰

In Nikephoros’s regulations, there is also mention of evening and morning prayers. All had to face east and refrain from all other activity when the prayers were being recited by the clergy. Cavalry had to dismount and stand facing east. Refusal to honor the time of prayer was punishable by shearing of the hair or a flogging or demotion. Yet, when Nikephoros approached the patriarch Polyeuktos with the proposal that his soldiers who had died fighting Muslim opponents be regarded as Christian martyrs and honored by the church, the patriarch, after agreeing to a consultation

on this matter, replied in the negative, citing the thirteenth Basilian canon as his primary reason.⁶¹

Along with the services of liturgy and prayer (Ektenies of intercession) the soldiers were also evidently drawn up in ranks to hear a rhetorical harangue that gave theological as well as political reasons for why their fight was just. Several of these have been rendered into English by Eric McGeer.⁶² A recurrent theme of the prayers for soldiers is that the power of the holy relics, especially those connected with the sufferings of Christ, will avert danger and grant the forgiveness of sins to those in peril of their lives. A similar concern, witnessed to this day in the Orthodox funeral services for fallen soldiers, can be found in a tenth-century hymn preserved in a single manuscript on Mount Sinai that petitions God that those valiant who have fallen may find the atonement of sins through their sacrifice: “All these brave soldiers—judge them worthy of your repose.”⁶³ In an equally old Akolouthia, or liturgical service of prayers, one finds the parallel theme, so often repeated in Byzantine church services for the military—that the might of the Cross will be of service to the Christian Byzantine *ethnos*. “Lord who fought with the most gentle David to defeat the Philistine, fight now beside your faithful emperors, and armed with the cross cast down their enemies.”⁶⁴

Conclusions

Basil’s *Ninety-two Canons* assumed massive importance at the same time that Byzantine canon law was promulgated in the form of the nomocanon, a genre whose name demonstrates the close approximation that is witnessed after the ninth century between the civil and religious laws of the empire. It was Basil’s authority that had blocked the road for Byzantine theologians or anyone else who wished to elevate either an approach to

57 The Lord Sabaoth, God of the Armies: cf. 1 Sam. 15:2; 1 Chron. 11:9; Ps. 46:7–10; and Is. 10:26.

58 In the Akathistos hymn, she is called the Great Promachos, the warrior Virgin defending Constantinople. All emperors after the time of Heraclius stopped at the Blachernae to pray before the relics of the Virgin to ask for her intercession in the wars they undertook.

59 *Præcepta Militaria* 4.11.110–12; McGeer, *Sowing the Dragon’s Teeth*, 44; Kulakovsky, Στρατηγικὴ ἔκθεσις, 15.

60 The following passage preceded one of the commander’s harangues immediately before the sprinkling of holy water. I have slightly adapted McGeer’s version of the address of the emperor Constantine VII to the strategoi of the East: “Behold that after drawing holy water from the immaculate and most sacred relics of the Passion of Christ our God; from the precious wooden fragments [of the True Cross] and the undefiled lance, the precious Titulus, the wonder-working Reed, the life-giving blood which flowed from his precious rib, the most sacred Tunic, the holy Wrapping Cloths, the God-bearing Shroud, and the other relics of his undefiled Passion—we have sent it to be sprinkled upon you all; so that you can be anointed with it and thus clothed with the power from on high.” E. McGeer, “Two Military Orations of Constantine VII,” in *Byzantine Authors: Literary Activities and Preoccupations; Texts and Translations Dedicated to the Memory of Nicolas Oikonomides*, ed. J. Nesbitt, The Medieval Mediterranean 49 (Leiden, 2003), 127–34, at 133.

61 The classical Byzantine soldier saints, it will be remembered, had all died a martyr’s death, executed off the field of battle, for the refusal to deny the faith. See Paul Stephenson, “About the emperor Nikephoros and how he leaves his bones in Bulgaria: A Context for the Controversial Chronicle of 811,” *DOP* 60 (2007): 87–109.

62 McGeer, “Two Military Orations of Constantine VII,” 111–35.

63 T. Détorakis and J. Mossay, “Un office byzantin inédit pour ceux qui sont morts à la guerre, dans le cod. Sin. gr. 734–735,” *Le Muséon* 101 (1988): 183–211.

64 *Akolouthia*, ed. A. Pertusi, “Una acolouthia militare inedita del X secolo,” *Aevum* 22 (1948): 145–68.

Christian law that gave it the status of sharia or a theology that reached back to the Old Testament archetypes (as did the Qur'an) and elevate once more (after ancient Israel) the notion of jihad. Instead, Byzantine Christianity espoused a more complex, and one might say a much more ambivalent, attitude toward the righteousness of war. It accepted that defensive war was necessary, and popularly speaking, there can be no doubt that the Byzantines celebrated their victories over foes who were widely seen as barbaric or evil. They were not a pacifist people, but the church literature remained from beginning to end ambivalent.

The literature never declassified the spilling of blood as a liturgically defiling action. In this it held up the clergy as being incapable of bearing arms or inciting violence, using them (as in so many other canon laws)⁶⁵ as a gold standard for the purity of doctrine and lifestyle that it could not count on in all other forms of civil life. Emperors were expected to be involved with armies. Politicians were in the business of the security of the state. Imperial historians, such as Anna Komnene or Michael Psellos, when they recounted an emperor's military campaigns, simply tended to recite the trope of his victory being a gift of God and revert to Deuteronomic scriptural texts to shore up their pieties.⁶⁶ One does not find this in what might be classified as the professional religious literature. Soldiers could be blessed, and shriven, and prayed for. Victories

could be celebrated as signs of God's vindication of his people, but never, so long as Byzantium endured, could there be a justification of holy war or righteous violence. The two terms were regarded as incompatibles that were juxtaposed in ordinary society only because of the compromised nature of the present age. Even so, the affairs of the altar, regulated by liturgical process and canonical decree, were evocative of the Next Age, not the current one, and could not be subordinated to it. Here, in the ecclesial world, or at least in the ecclesial mind, there would be no war, no violence, no wickedness.

It is in the formal religious literature that the ideal of non-war is held up, even in the realia of an empire that was barely ever free from continuous strife and bitter military struggle.⁶⁷ Many commentators from Gibbon onward have regarded this ambivalence with scorn, as an indication either of the sapping of will that the code of the Gospel brought to the virility of Roman arms or as a sign of the "tricky nature" of the Byzantines. It is, however, hardly evidence for either supposition. On the contrary, this ambivalence toward war of a Christian military society seems to me an honorable testament to a people who wanted the highest of standards in a compromised world and were sufficiently subtle, and morally and intellectually sophisticated enough, to know that they had to hold more than a monochromatic theory as a result.

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65 Take for example the canon that allowed several marriages to laity in the Eastern church but forbade that economy to the clergy.

66 See, for example, Komnene's *Alexiad*, 8.2.5: Leib, *Anne Comnène, Alexiade*, 2:132; Reinsch and Kambylis, *Annae Comnenae Alexias*, 240; Sewter, *Alexiad of Anna Comnena*, 250. Anna directly applies Deuteronomy 32:30 to her father's campaign against the Scythians. For Psellos, see *Chronographia*, 3.9, in *Michel Psellos, Chronographie*, ed. E. Renauld, 2 vols. (Paris, 1967), 1:38, and *Michael Psellus, Fourteen Byzantine Rulers*, trans. E. R. A. Sewter (Harmondsworth, 1966), 69, describing Romanos III's disaster at Aleppo in 1030 as a reversal for the empire, rescued from being a total calamity only by God's directly intervening hand.

67 See G. T. Dennis, "Defenders of the Christian People: Holy War in Byzantium," in *The Crusaders from the Perspective of Byzantium and the Muslim World*, ed. A. E. Laiou and R. P. Mottahedeh (Washington, DC, 2001), 31–39.